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ABSTRACT

With the increased funding made available by California Assembly Bill 1725, community college faculty members have the opportunity to inform themselves and make changes in policy regarding the disabled. The disabled are often overlooked as a special interest or underrepresented group in affirmative action plans. Individuals involved with the disabled can play critical roles in assisting local academic senates to make their schools aware of the need to recruit and hire the disabled. These specialists can help the senates by pointing out the poor representation of the disabled among faculty, staff, and administrators, and by influencing local policy development and hiring decisions. They should also serve on affirmative action committees as representatives, in order to further sensitize the campus community to the needs of the disabled. Districts and local senates should work together to review district affirmative action plans. Because our culture places extreme value on physical perfection, the disabled face formidable obstacles in becoming part of the community. Within the collegiate setting, these harmful perceptions can be changed. This legislation's focus on staff and faculty development will facilitate modifications in the curriculum and the teaching-learning environment in order to encourage greater recognition of and sensitivity toward the disabled. (WJT)

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MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE DISABLED

by Karen S. Grosz, President
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Paper presented at the Disabled Students Programs and Services Conference

Sacramento, California
May 4, 1989

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Meeting the Needs of the Disabled

A Speech by Karen S. Grosz, President
Academic Senate for California Community Colleges

Delivered at the DSP&S Conference
May 4, 1989

Abstract

Faculty members' perceptions of disabled students and disability issues provide a valuable perspective. The following presentation, given at the 1989 California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office DSP&S Conference by the President of the Academic Senate, outlines a philosophical framework and a call for action for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all aspects of higher education.

Meeting the Needs of the Disabled

When I prepared for this speech, I wanted to address the Academic Senate role in facilitating recognition of the disabled, not only in terms of the need to increase the numbers of disabled candidates in our hiring pools as a necessary step to increasing their representation in administration, staff and faculty ranks, but also in terms of better educating faculty, staff and administration about appropriate treatment of disabled students. To my knowledge, no printed material exists on that particular topic. Therefore, my comments stem from my own rather limited experience in this field and my perception of the needed activities for senates and college personnel who work with the disabled to accomplish the desired results.

I have encountered only a few severely disabled students over the years, and perhaps for that reason, I remember them well. An over-riding characteristic they all shared was the passionate desire to fit in with everyone else. My observation was that most students sensed that desire and honored it by not being overly solicitous about assisting with a wheelchair or becoming impatient about speech impediments. Perhaps we have unusually capable faculty members in special services working with these students, but I like to believe that all of our faculty members are unusually capable.

Disabled students seem to have that necessary blend of assertiveness

and belief in their abilities that makes them wonderful to work with (in effect, of course, I am describing any ideal student). However, the physically disabled have been tested in ways I can only marginally understand, and this test of their strength, both physical and emotional, has created a character special to this group, recognized for its blend of patience, diligence and hardiness. Even the most physically fragile representatives of the group I am describing evidence a toughness, a rugged independence admirable on its surface. It is this toughness that enables the blind to see what we who are sighted cannot see, allows the deaf to hear what we cannot hear, and permits the paraplegic to soar above the rest of us caught in our lock-step routine.

In the distant past, I used to tell my students that they could succeed only after they had made an honest appraisal of their limitations. This was in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when students proudly announced that they could be anything they wanted to be. In my stuffiest, most authoritarian manner, for I was very young then and felt the need to assert myself, I assured the students that each one of them had limitations. While I was thinking in terms of their abilities to control the English language, students invariably applied the comment in terms of their physical capabilities, assuring me that because they all possessed two arms, two legs and no serious physical disabilities, they could do anything. It was so immediate an identification between succeeding in life, in college, in my English class and their physical structure that it was mind-boggling. However, this was before the implementation of high tech centers with their marvelous array of computer capabilities. More important, though, it was before the appearance of Bree Walker, a disabled television network newscaster, or Jim Abbott, a disabled pitcher with the California Angels. It was a day when people with disabilities had no role models on network news or in pro sports.

What concerns me is that TV journalism and sports, both highly dependent upon presentation and performance of physically well-developed individuals, are ready to include Bree Walker and Jim Abbott, while colleges statewide continue to neglect the disabled in making employment decisions for faculty and administrator positions.

Just a few weeks ago, in discussion of the employment provisions of Assembly Bill 1725, a faculty member asked me why the 30% figure applies only to hiring of ethnic minorities, instead of referencing all under-represented groups, including the disabled. I could reply only that in the development of that mandated goal, representatives of ethnic minority groups were very vocal and persistent, and their persistence eventually was recognized.

Similarly, the early drafts of the report of the Joint Committee for Review of the Master Plan for Higher Education referenced the need for all of California's higher education to focus upon increasing the representation of ethnic minorities among faculty and administration. It was not until the president of the California Association for Postsecondary Educators of the Disabled (CAPED) spoke up and noted the omission of the disabled that the Joint Committee report was revised to include this group. Similarly, CAPED representatives had to testify before the Board of Governors to note the omission of the disabled in the Board's affirmative action plan titled, "Toward a New Diversity," before that plan was revised to include reference to the disabled.

In thinking about why the disabled have been a forgotten group, I have wondered if perhaps it is partly because of every individual's desire to overcome a disability and perform to the best of her/his ability. Everyone wants to fit in with the crowd, be accepted as a person with valued ideas, not as someone apart from everyone else. All of us have fought that occasional battle with separateness, and we know how uncomfortable it is. You will notice that, as with my students of long ago, I start with the assumption that we all have limitations and that only when we recognize those limitations can we find ways to overcome them. Now I realize that, as with so much in my early teaching career, I was going at this issue backwards. Instead of focusing upon what they cannot do, students need constantly to focus on what they can do, to build upon their abilities and to gradually overcome their limitations. This is the model which the disabled have presented for us. Bree Walker delights in what she can do and does not focus on her physical disability; in fact, the disability is clearly irrelevant. However, it is part of Bree Walker, something she has had to live with and deal with. Similarly, Jim Abbott wants only to be recognized as a successful pitcher and does not invite attention to his disability. He wants to fit into the world of professional baseball, not stand out as an anomaly. But like Bree Walker, he does stand out as a role model for many others striving to deal with their individual limitations. We need more of these role models, and we need them on our community college campuses.

Individuals involved with the disabled have a critically important role of assisting local academic senates in developing an awareness of the need to recruit and hire the disabled. Districts right now should be in the process of reviewing district affirmative action plans. Local senates have been advised that they should play an active role in these reviews. Specialists who work with the disabled can assist the senates by noting the disparity between the numbers of disabled individuals in society and their representation among faculty, staff and administration. The present Chancellor's

Office staff in DSP&S and the CAPED president are all models for imitation, for they have been active and effective in speaking up for the disabled, bringing this group to the attention of faculty, administrators and legislators on a statewide level. They need the help of specialists at the local level, specialists who can focus attention upon the disabled in local policy development and hiring decisions.

A second way in which specialists working with the disabled can assist local academic senates is by serving on affirmative action committees as representatives of one of the most under-represented groups, the disabled. All too often, when asked to name under-represented groups for affirmative action consideration, faculty members focus upon ethnic minorities and exclude recognition of the disabled. As a result, both students and faculty are shortchanged. Just as we have much to learn from working with people of color, we also have much to learn from working with the disabled. Local senates have been encouraged to establish their own affirmative action committees to consider student, staff, administration and faculty needs. By serving on a senate affirmative action committee, specialists can help to sensitize the campus community to the needs of those with disabilities and begin to work to meet their needs.

Dr. Carlos Cortes of UC, Riverside, gives a wonderful talk on the need for recognition of the diversity within the American community. Focusing on the national motto, *"E pluribus unum,"* Cortes notes the need for introducing all groups to the traditions and values of American life, the *"unum"* that makes us a cohesive community. At the same time, he suggests that everyone must develop sensitivity to the diverse cultural and racial groups that constitute that community. This is the *"pluribus"* part of the motto. Only when people care enough to draw together as a community, he indicates, through sharing ideas and beliefs, can the community survive. Yet it must always remain a community of individuals with different, unique needs and attitudes.

For the disabled, as distinct from ethnic groups, the problems encountered in becoming part of the community can sometimes seem impossible, and for the severely disabled, they certainly are formidable. But beyond the obvious problem of fitting in and trying to make a physical disability fade from attention lies a more insidious difficulty, for our culture values physical perfection to the extent that among teenagers even five pounds of excess weight can lead to social problems. While precious few of us ever attain this physical perfection, we all have that platonic ideal in mind and act, often unconsciously, to dismiss those who do not measure up to that impossible ideal. We are a culture that perversely idolizes the physical and overlooks the moral and intellectual worth of an individual, and we are

paying for that perversity with the immoral and stupid acts of our otherwise good-looking politicians. I suspect that the students at Gallaudet University were acting on this belief in the need to transform their values into reality by forcing the appointment of a hearing-impaired president, one with whom they could communicate directly. Whether or not one agrees with their methods, the students sent a clear message about their beliefs in the abilities of the disabled and their desire for an active role model.

When we allow the perverse values of superficial appearance over inner worth to permeate the academy, the loss is even greater, for it is within the collegiate setting that we can at least begin to change those distorted ethics and help create improved values. To my mind, this is the major benefit of teaching critical thinking, of helping students to see beneath the surface and begin to evaluate the inner worth of an idea or a person. Eventually, we may see the appointment of a Hispanic, Native American Indian, Black/ African-American or Asian-American female with a disability to an important position on campus.

Assembly Bill 1725 provides us with the vehicle for effecting that change. With its attention to faculty and staff diversity, we can begin to change the faculty, staff and administration. With the legislation's attention to faculty and staff development, we can begin to examine ways to modify the curriculum and the teaching-learning environment to encourage people to recognize the contributions of the disabled and to be sensitive to their needs and potentials as human beings who want to be productive members of society and who have much to offer. With the legislation's intent to push the community colleges to reflect the diversity of the state's population, faculty members have an opportunity to educate not just the campus community but the community at large concerning the abilities of the disabled whose numbers will most likely continue to grow. With the increased funding to be made available for AB 1725 reforms, community college faculty members can make changes. This is a rare opportunity.

There is a more immediate way in which the Academic Senate at the state level would welcome the expertise of specialists who work with the disabled. In the preparation of the lists of disciplines, related disciplines and disciplines not requiring a master's degree, the senate recognized it does not sufficiently understand the hiring qualifications of the specialists. The senate needs and welcomes the help of faculty members who know this particular area.

I urge student services specialists to work with their local senates to help faculty members at large grasp this opportunity to better meet the needs of the disabled, both as students and as prospective employees, and

to make the most of it. With patience and persistence, the disabled community can overcome the limitations of a society which is on the threshold of seeing the pitching capacity of a Jim Abbott and the broadcasting abilities of a Bree Walker. This is exactly the moment to be most energetic, for changes will occur and faculty members can either sit back quietly now and complain later, or act now and open up opportunities for that growing population of the disabled.

Personal Summary

Karen Sue Grosz is the president of the Academic Senate for the California Community Colleges. She has a master's degree from the University of Illinois-Champaign, and additional graduate work from the University of California, Los Angeles, and the University of Rochester. Karen, an English instructor at Santa Monica College, has served in diverse and numerous professional capacities, including editor of the Forum, the Academic Senate's scholarly journal, member of the Intersegmental Coordinating Council, and the Planning Committee for Joint Legislative Committee Conference on Student Needs.

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